Walt Disney
PICTURES PRESENTS

MULAN

STYLE guide

Hans P Bacher

1995

Correction of Layout-Studies

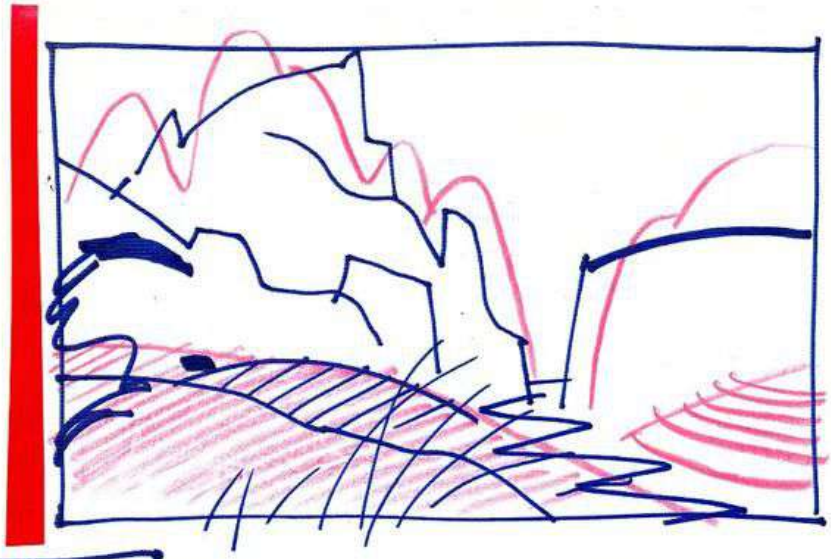
This Layout would work for a 'Bierstadt'-Style Picture. It doesn't look Chinese at all.

The foreground has as much detail as the background, there is no focus-level, the character - Mulan on her horse - gets lost.

Always remember the main rule of the Chinese Style - BALANCE - balanced positive and negative space, balance between empty and busy space.

Create a stage for the animation, the elements of your composition should lead the eye to the character.

Avoid repeating similar patterns and shapes like the river, rocks, grass and trees - create an interesting variety, use symbols, don't copy reality.



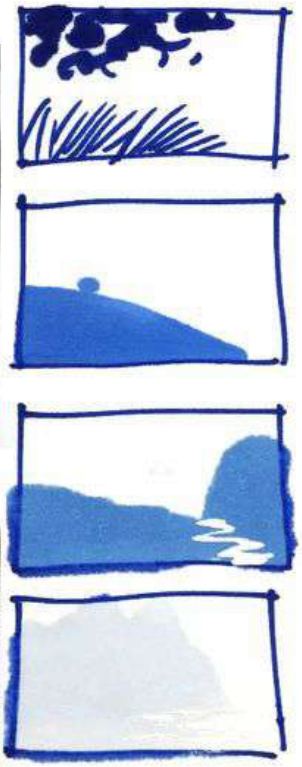
You get the best feeling for composition and contrast-values in small thumbnail- sketches. Try to use a limited amount of Grey's or Blue's - not more than 4. All these different ideas for the same scene should be used for discussion and correction like what we do with color-keys for Backgrounds.

Check in the ARL-Archives the thumbnails done for BAMBI.

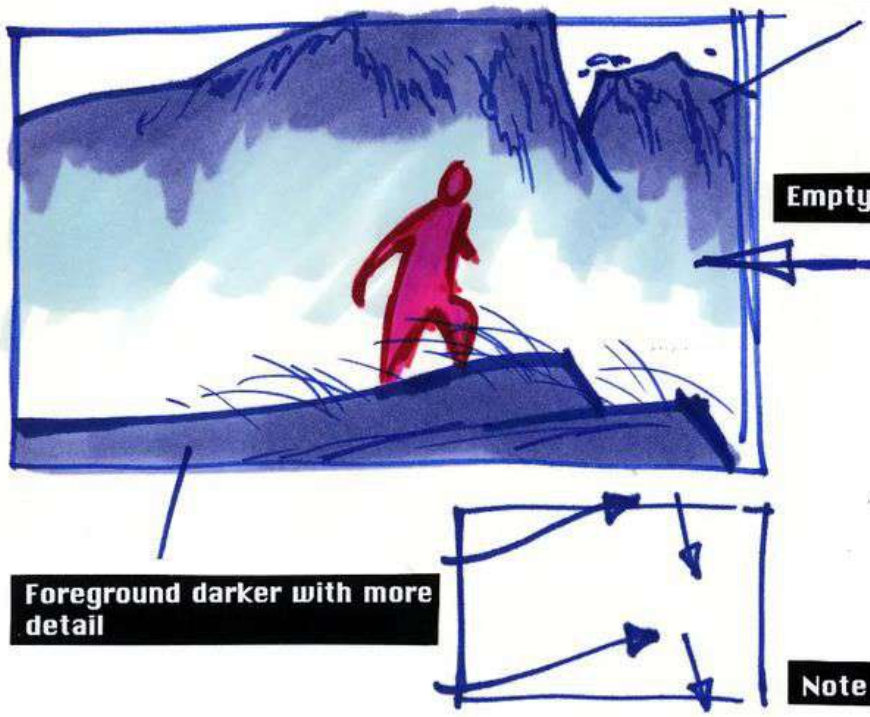
Correction

Separate the background into several detail-levels, starting with nearly no detail in the mountain-level, like they were in the mist, the closer you move to the fore-ground and to were your focus-level is, the more detail you use. Always make sure the character is readable. Light in front of Dark, Dark in front of Light.

In case all the information you have to show in one Background is overloading your drawing with too much detail - discuss it with your Head of the Deptmt., the Art-Director and the Directors. It is better to create an additional scene or reduce the amount of Information than to destroy the look of the film.



Some detail at the Top-end of the mountains, disappearing into the mist.



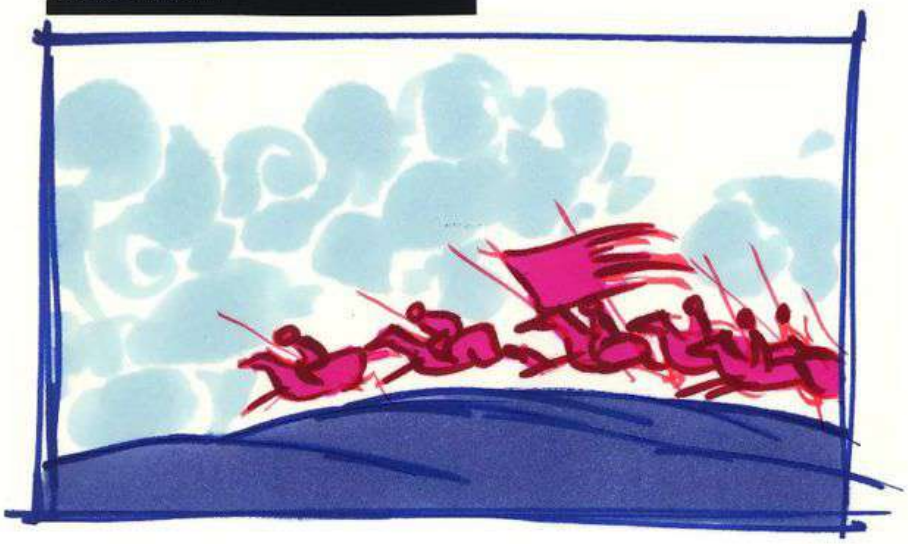
Empty 'stage' for character

Foreground darker with more detail

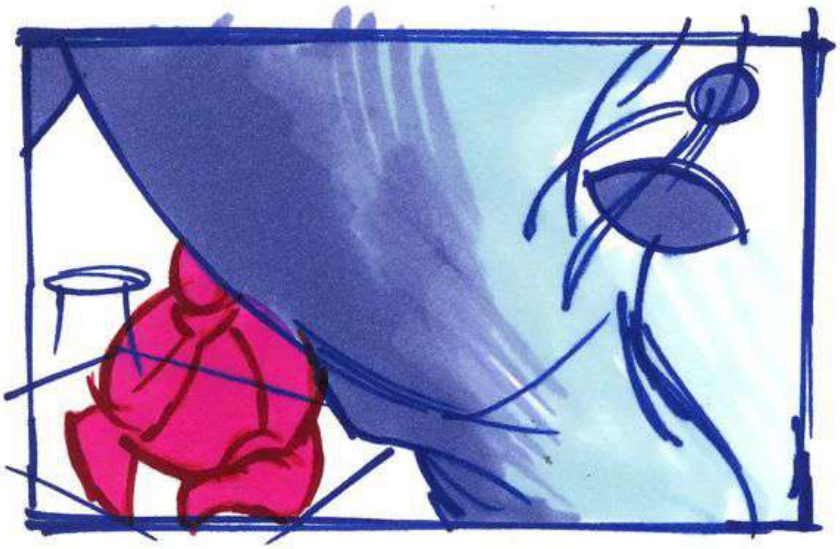
Note composition

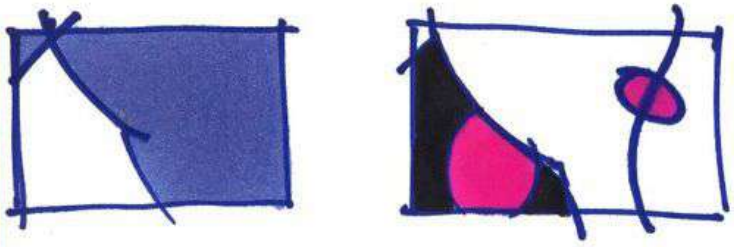
Avoid whenever it is possible confusing detail around the character-/animation area

It wouldn't make sense to add detail in the background or to animate the clouds, the action is important...



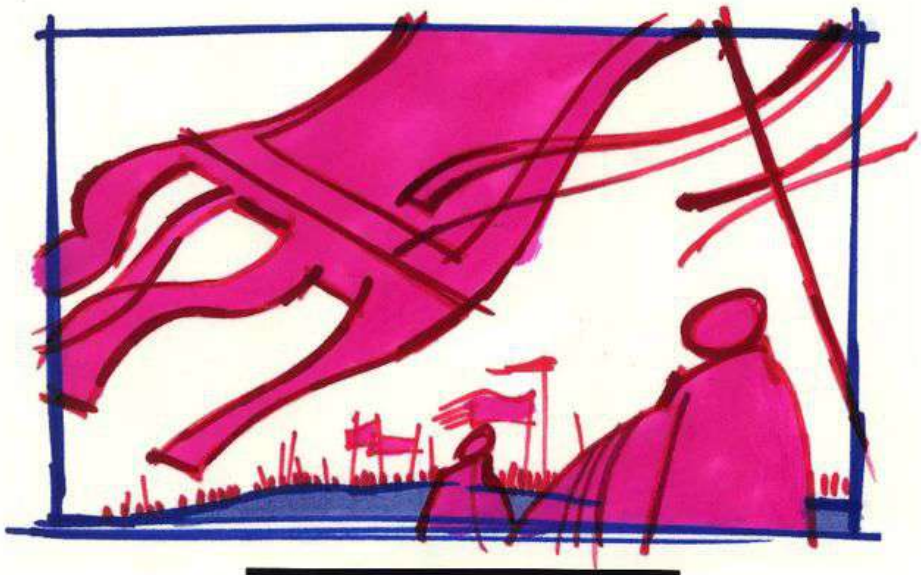
...but in a more athmospheric scene like this where you need to create mood the clouds should be part of the animation and composition.





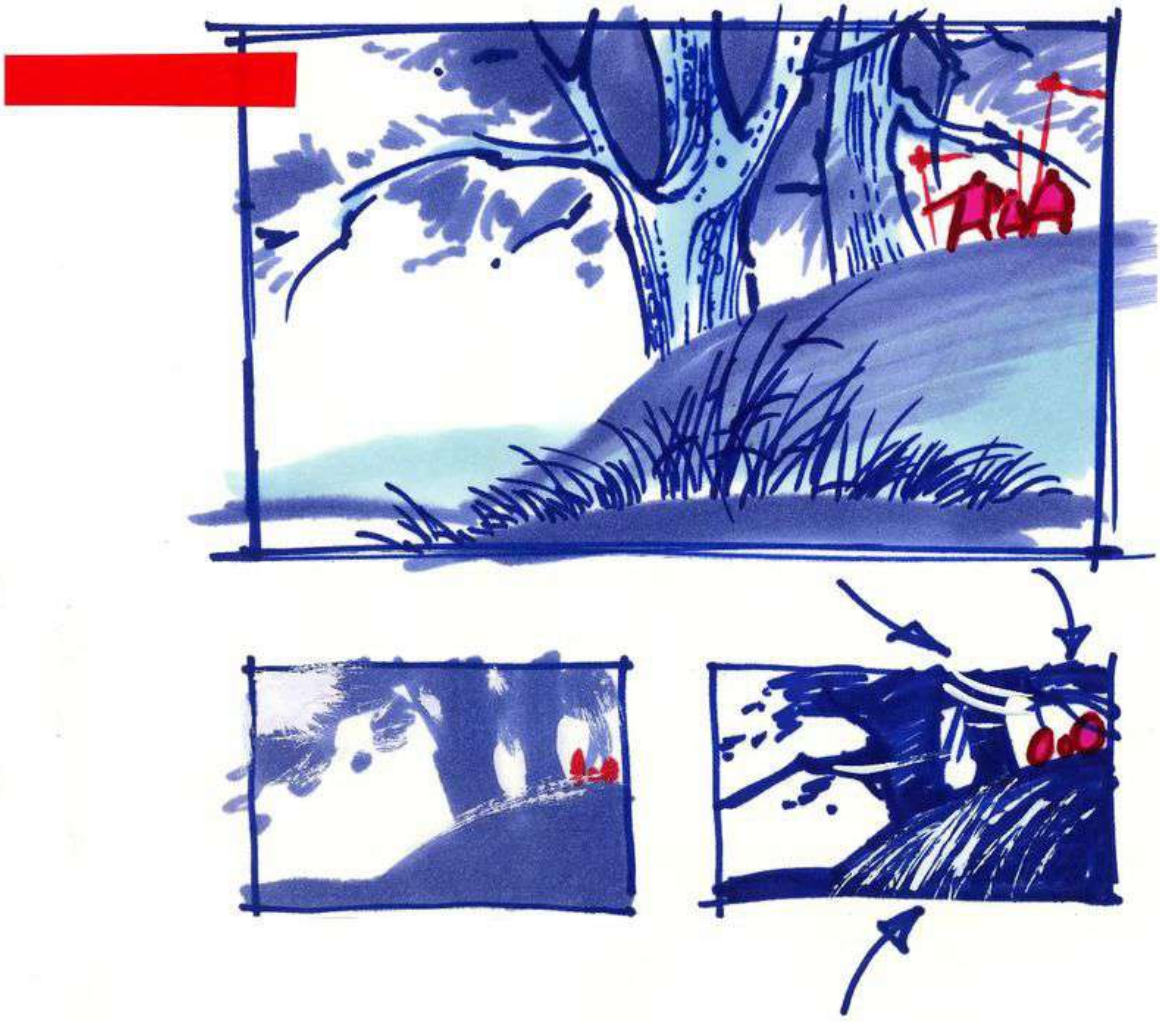
Note the balance between positive and negative space

In this case the foreground element and the character would be animated, with the focus and detail level on the curtain and the character.



Note the empty stage without the characters. The animation creates the final composition and has to be designed very careful, especially when CGI is involved creating crowds or animated objects like the flaggs, and everything has to be planned way ahead.

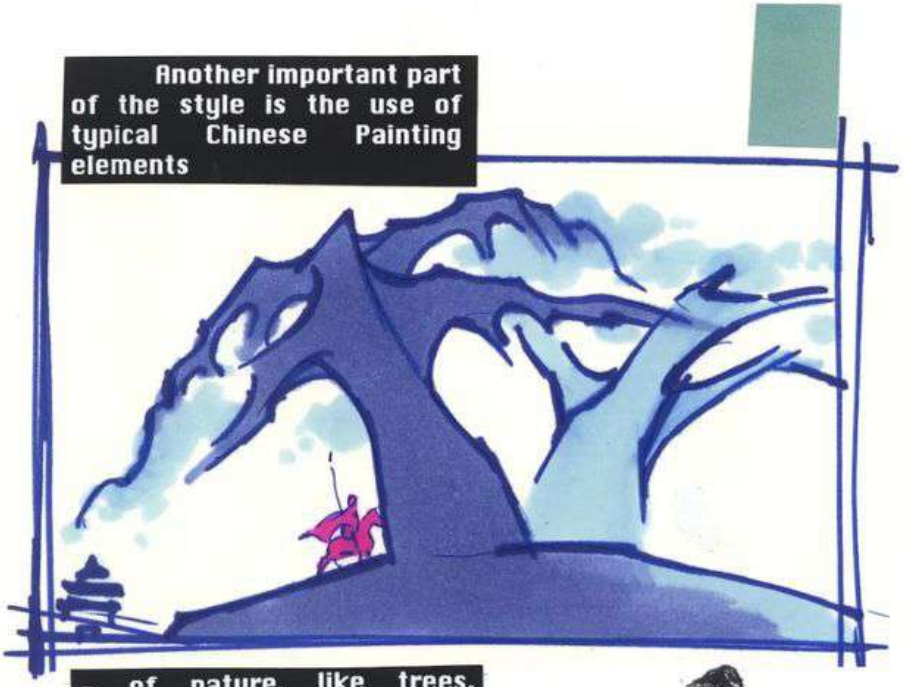
Use shapes and detail-elements of the Background to lead the eye to the 'stage' epecially when action is not located in center of your composition.



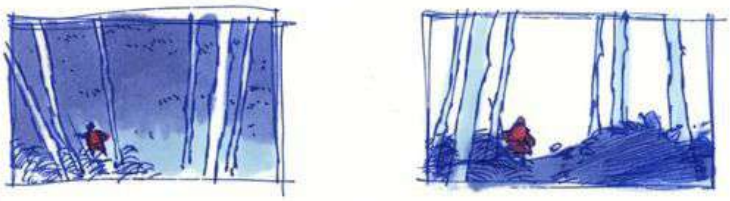
Choose interesting compositions like Down- or Upshots.
A Downshot with a well animated shadow and very little detail on the ground, but with a framing detailed out-focus foreground can be very effective.

The same for Upshots...

Another important part of the style is the use of typical Chinese Painting elements



- of nature, like trees, bamboo, mountains, cloud-shapes...
- of architecture



Staging Ideas

Note the balanced composition –

Rethinking of MULAN's BG-/Layout-Style

Nov.13, 1995

In general there were problems from the very beginning combining necessary story-information and details with the demands of the style.

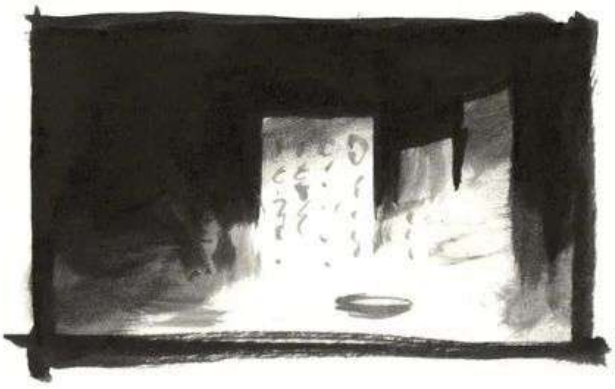
My stylistic approach was and still is besides using typical chinese elements - >Less is more<. That means to show detail when necessary and then in limited amounts and in harmony with the staging of the characters.

Unfortunately - similar to the character-style - we lost more and more of that idea.

The second important issue now is about combining the new more stylized charac-ters with our backgrounds. These characters don't work on top of overdetailed backgrounds.

The conclusion is - we have to redesign certain areas like

- Mulan's house - (exterior + interior)
- Temple (exterior + interior)
- Stable - especially in Sequ.3.9
- Garden



Here is an example -

This is the interior of the temple as it should look like...

...and this is what we are doing. In the Original Layout it looks even more detailed and confusing with all the lettering and stonecarved faces.

In my stylized version I treated the stone tablets like the simplified landscape designs.

We avoid to show in detail what is not necessary and would confuse the composition - we shouldn't forget the rule - create an empty stage for the action.
If we need to show detail we change our lighting, focus or camera-lens.

And avoid excessive use of perspective - there is no perspective in Chinese Art. Create depth by defining the focus levels.

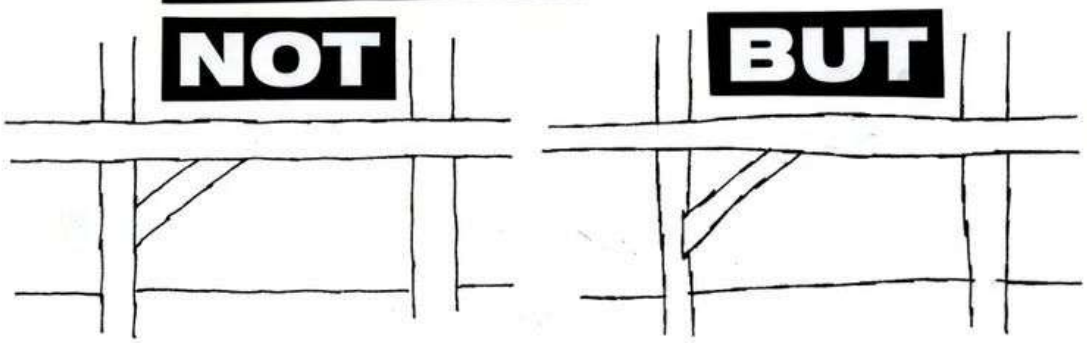
> for Layout

- Design the flow of Character action first and arrange the necessary background information around that area.
- Simplify the establishing shots and add detail when you cut in closer.

- Simplification means just enough to feel the scale and the distance.

Caricature

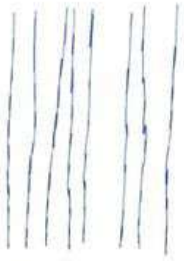
Avoid parallel and straight lines -

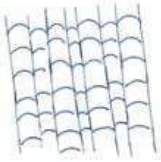


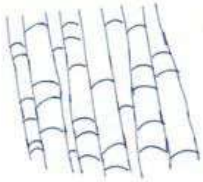
painted in the final backgrounds this stylistic element seems to disappear, but the shape-outlines are more pleasing to the eye.

Some more examples of controlled > Wrong < drawings -

... avoid parallel lines, use different spacing, no straight lines. And try to avoid repeti-tive shapes ...

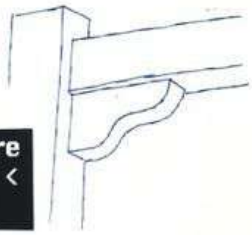


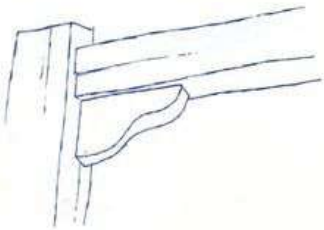


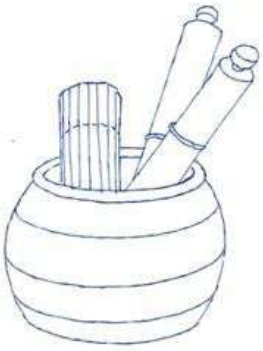


... no repetition - make shapes interesting ...

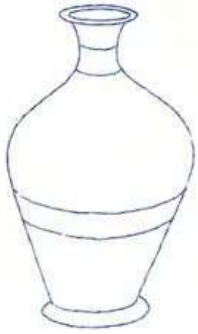
... here you can compare how boring the > Right < drawn version looks ...

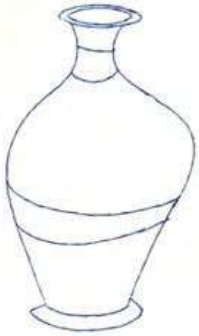




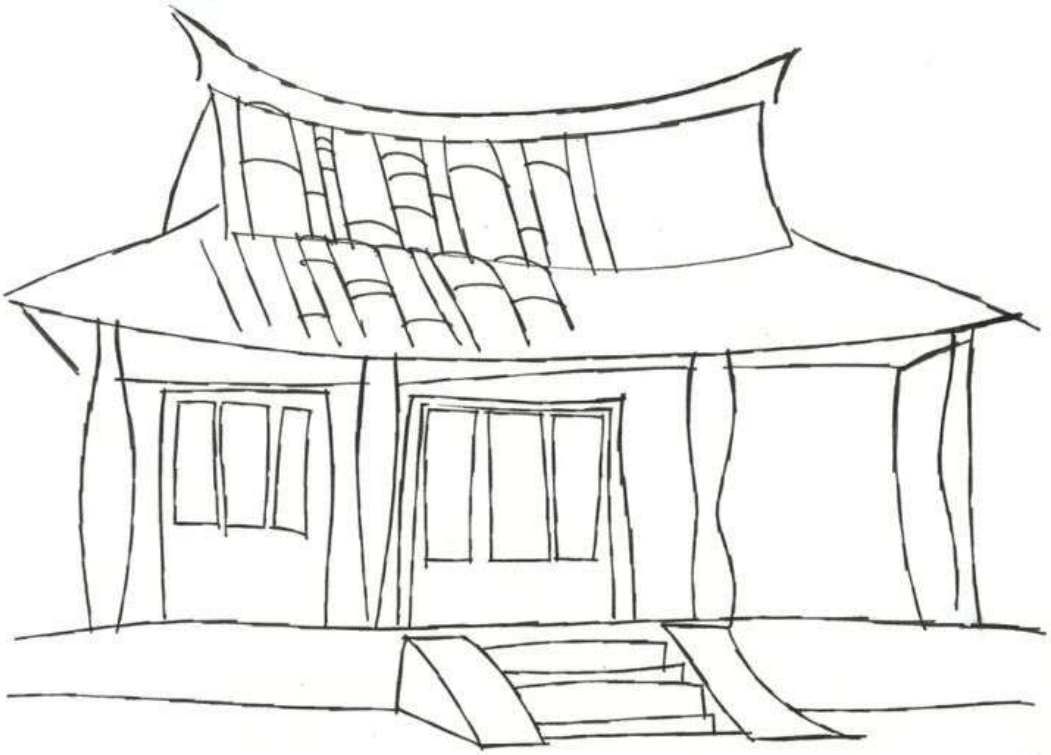


... use shapes they are a little bit off - away from realism ...





... but - be careful
with the exaggeration -

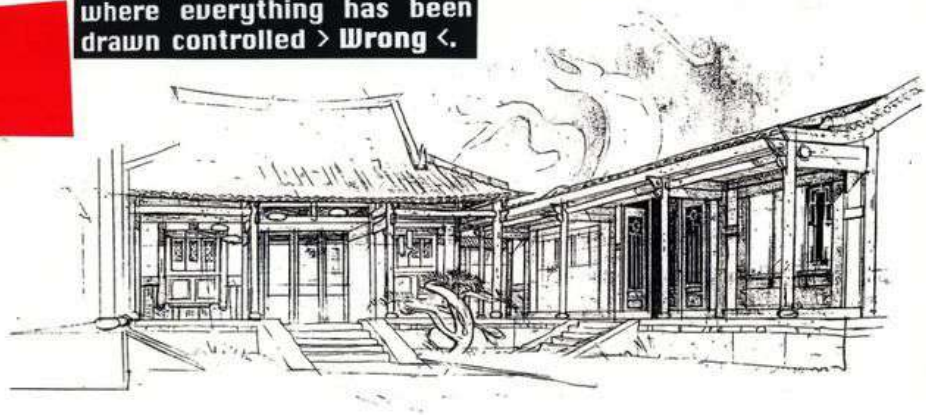


- that is too much !

Architecture and Detail

In this example I want to demonstrate how the Information Design can be translated into our Layout Style.

Compare the 2 drawings - it is interesting that the stylistically changed version looks more appealing with not one single parallel line, where everything has been drawn controlled > Wrong <.



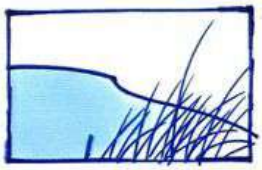
Rules

A rule of the style is to use detail only where the point of interest is.

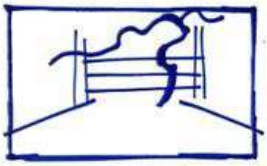
I case of an establishing shot where we can't avoid to show more information than usual, especially in connection with architecture, we should use the pos./neg. balance rules as well as the right use of light, shadow and perspective - and counterbalance too many straight lines with curves in trees, hanging lanterns and other additional objects.

In the final color-version keeping the complicated areas monochrome, avoiding too many different colors, we reduce the effect of too much detail.

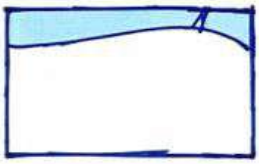
Rules



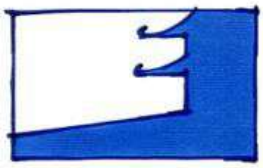
Balance between busy and quiet ...



Balance between straight and curved ...



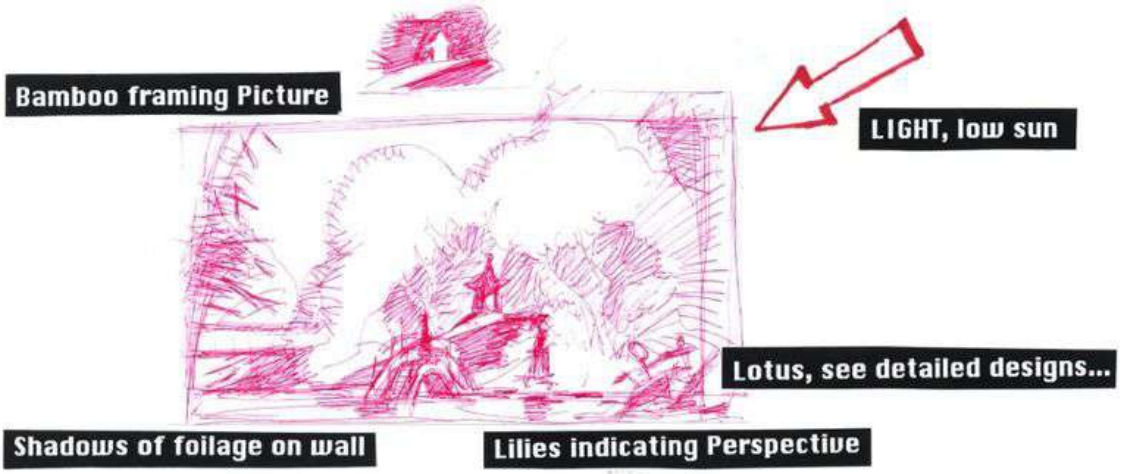
Balance between positive and negative space ...



Clear silhouette readability ...

Empty stage for the action ...

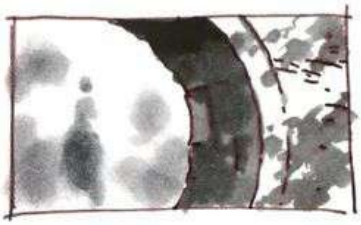
Avoid overloading the picture with too much information ...



Composition-Studies

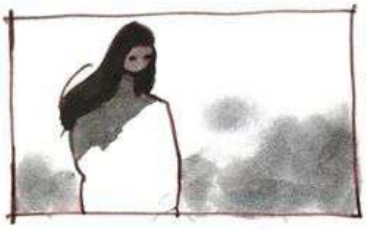
Ideas for the song...

soft look for close ups
- similar to Backlit-effect -



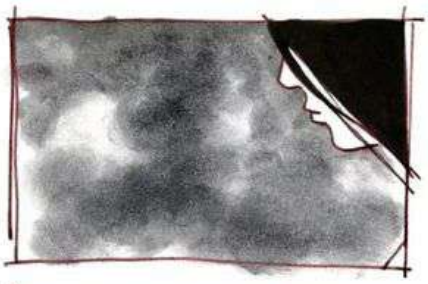
foreground on focus,
background include Animation
out of focus -

CGI-animated foilage
in foreground - downshot -



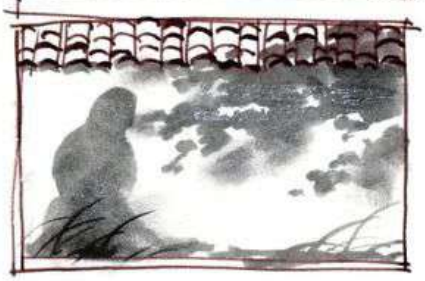
Mulan is walking in
and out of the tree-shadows
on the way up to the temple,
BG out of focus -

unusual placement of the character together with moving out of focus shadow-elements -



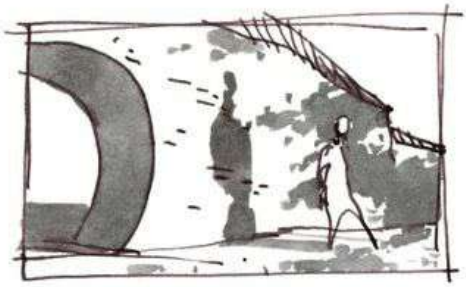
silhouetted back-ground-elements, slightly moving -

just moving shadows



Character soft - on focus backlit effect through foliage

extreme close-ups.



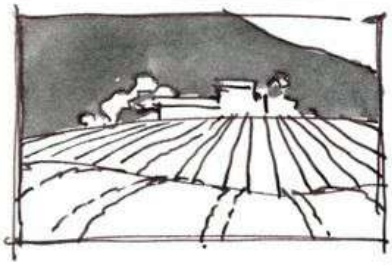
Character and foliage shadow on the wall and ground –

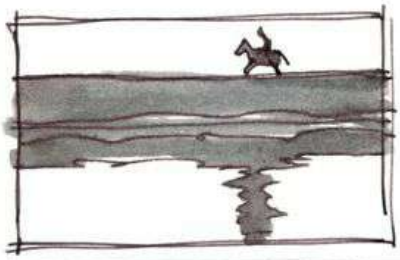
the character reads light in front of the darker shadow-area –

use of extreme Tele-lenses, the foreground will be completely out of focus –

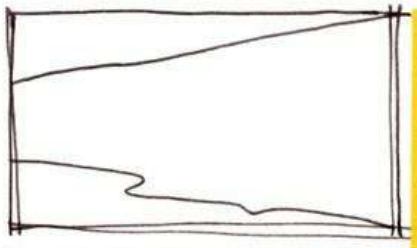
In scenes closer on the character keep the background and composition simple –

nothing should get more attention than the character !

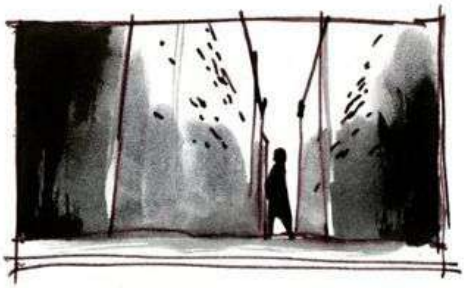


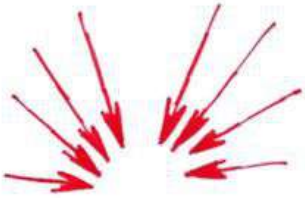


horizontal lines are good for peaceful moments –



avoid to connect the corners of the frame.

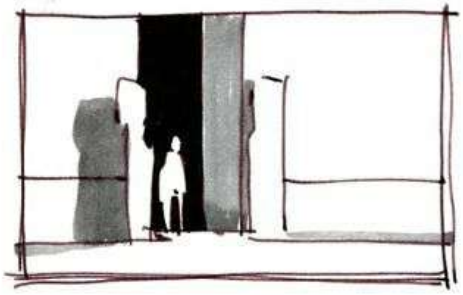




Try to create emotion in your compositions. Like fear- someone is trapped...

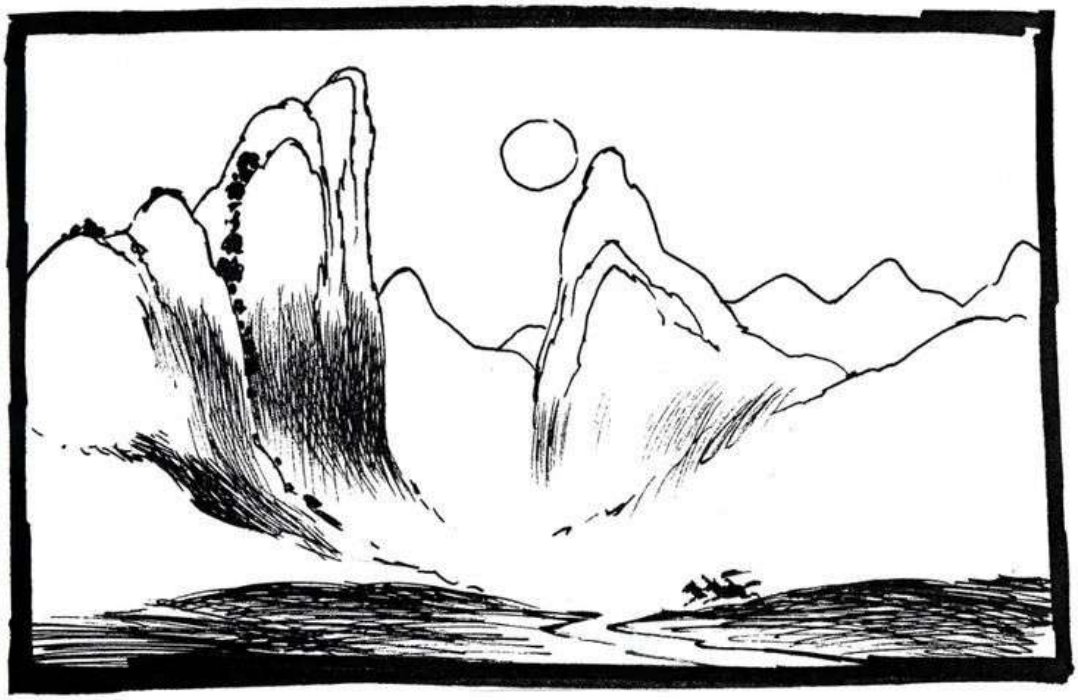
...or the opposite - open skies and the feeling that it creates...

Composition-Studies



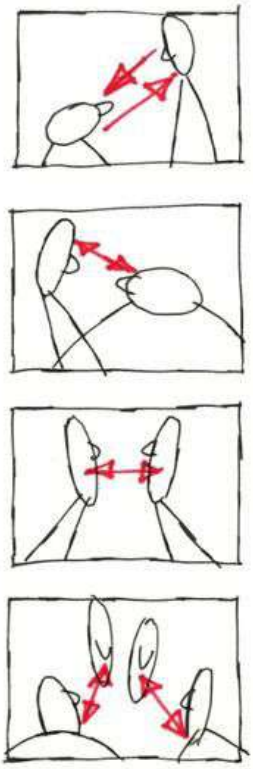
...there are always the same rules - light in front of dark and opposite, or warm in front of cold and opposite, or curved in front of straight and opposite, or simple in front of very detailed and opposite and so on - always using the contraries.

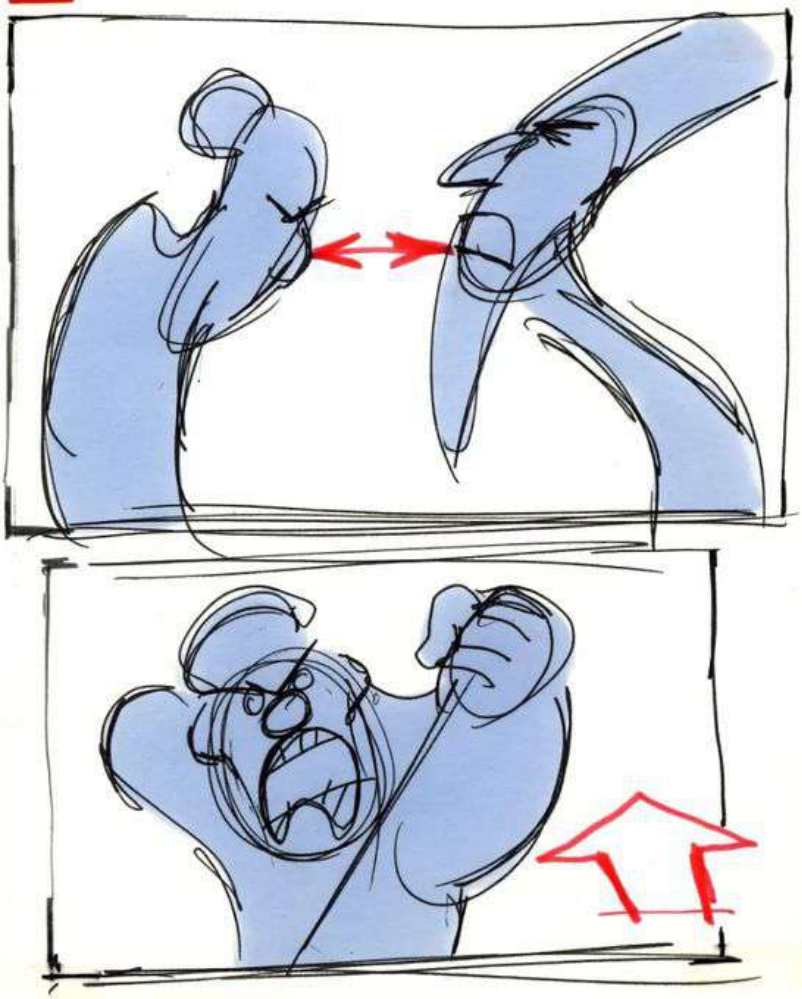
Layout and Staging



Create a Stage for the animation -
the best way is to plan the key-poses first with a very rough Layout, then build the background around them.
Working that way you keep the character-acting-area free from distracting details.

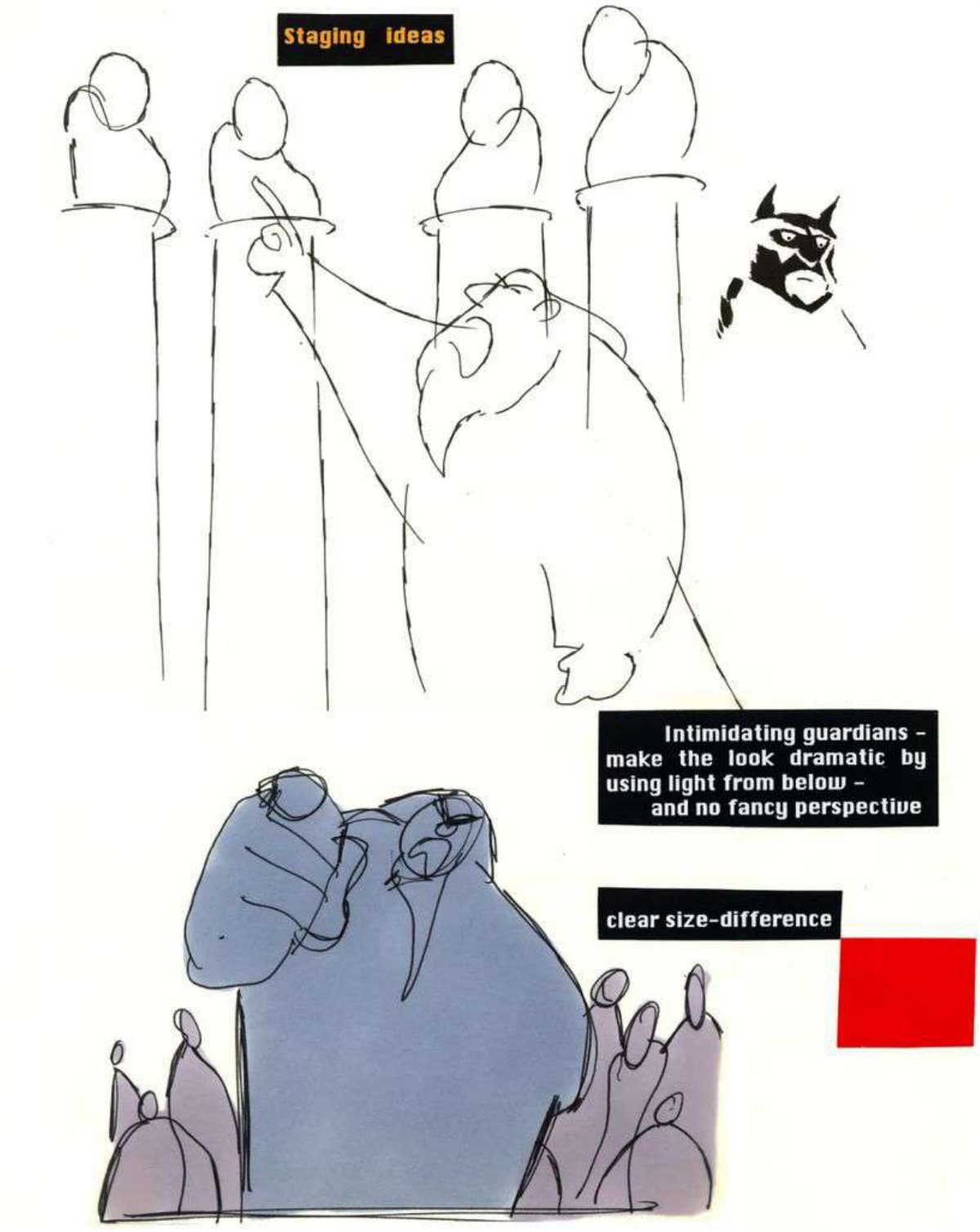
In your first very rough Layout sketch and in thumb-nails you have to plan the basic elements, the perspec-tive, camera-angles and the contrast.





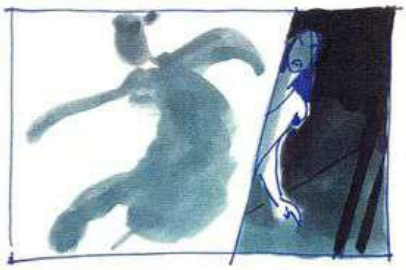
Staging ideas

clear readability !


Staging ideas
Intimidating guardians -
make the look dramatic by
using light from below -
and no fancy perspective
clear size-difference

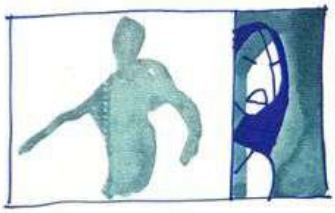
COMPOSITION

In general more dramatic camera-angles –



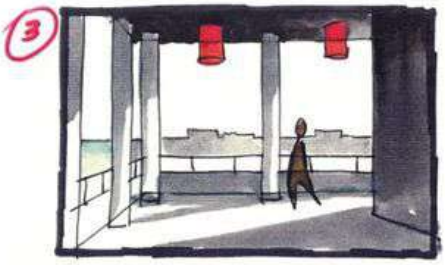
Mulan in father's shadow –

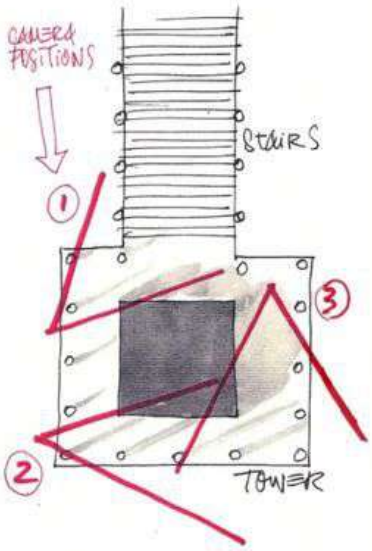
father's shadow on wall in front of Mulan –



COMPOSITION

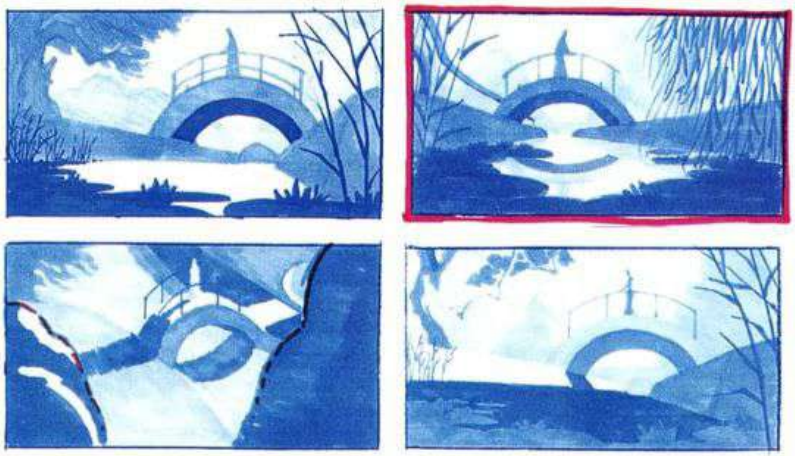
the showdown on top of the tower



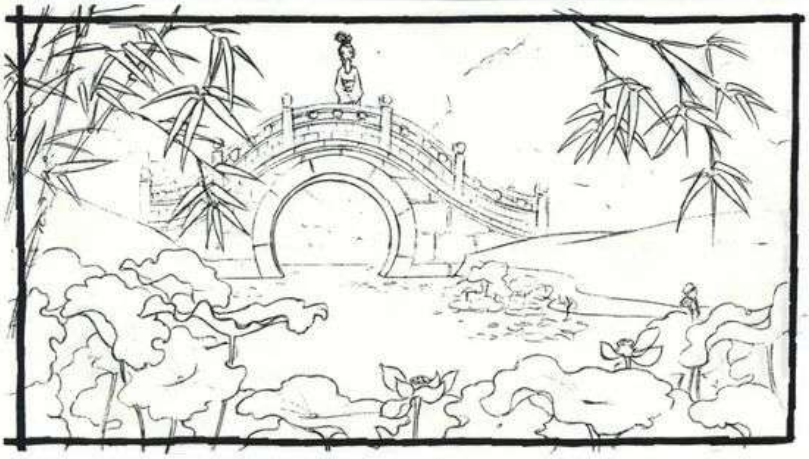


define clearly the location with elements of the architecture and the shadows...

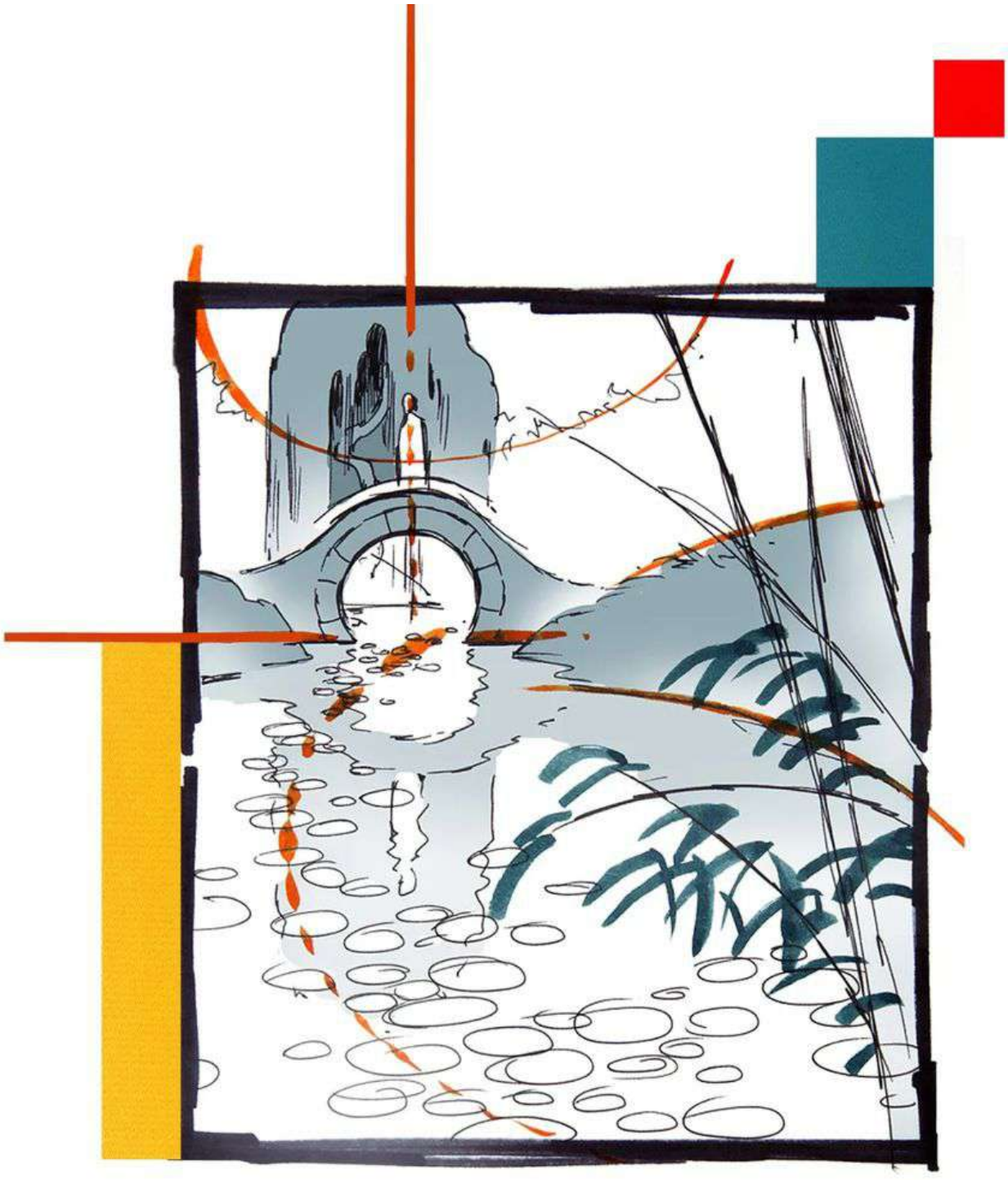
Very first thumbnails...



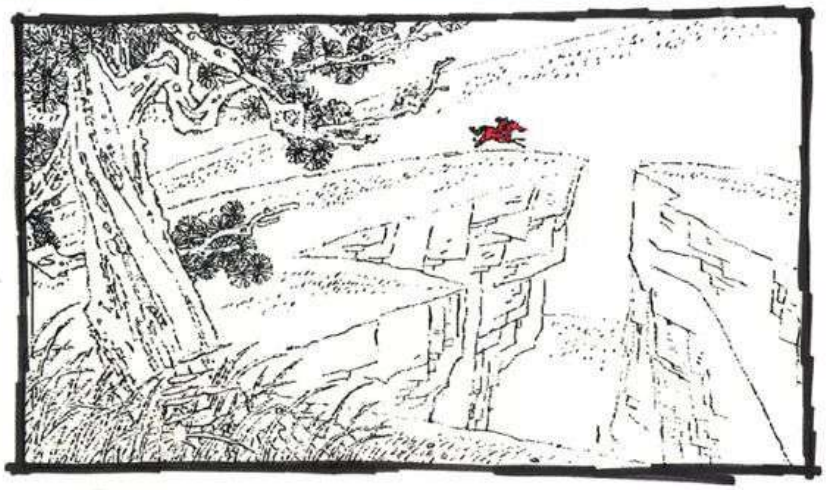
Correction of Layout-Studies

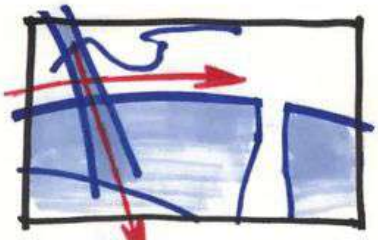


Composition is not clear enough. Don't copy reality - go for the interpretation and don't forget our Style rules.



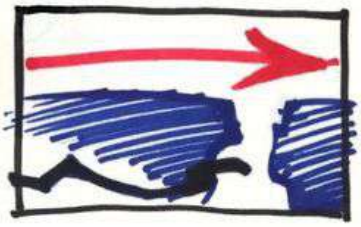
Layout-Correction



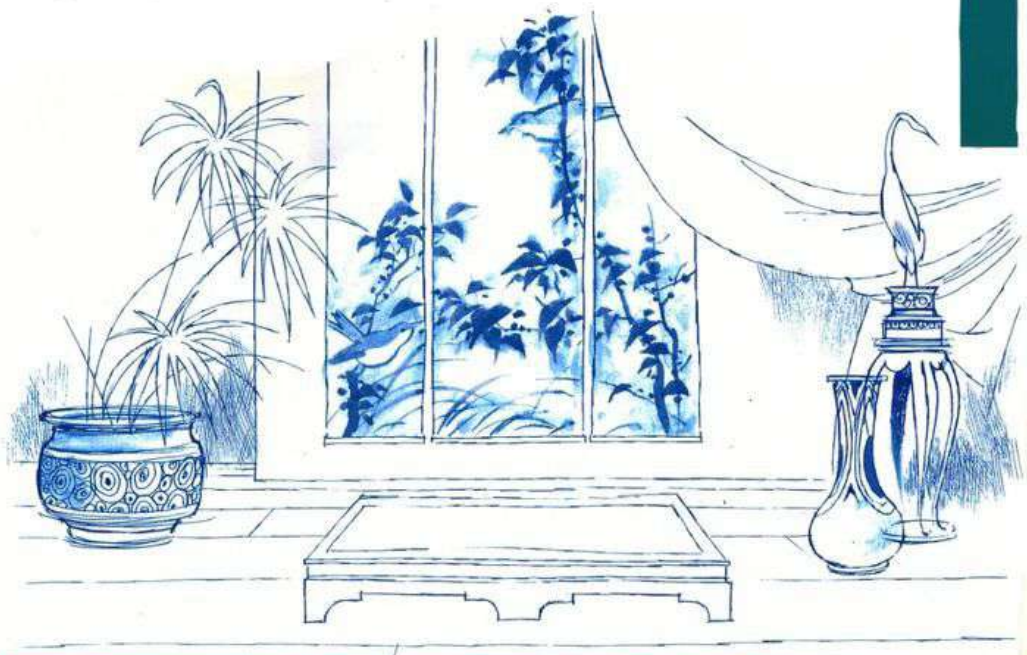


confusing angles...

...here the screen direction is clear, even the tree branch points towards the right -



more Layout Correction



Corrections for Sequ.9

The arrows are important - so concentrate on the foreground. Don't make that tree too detailed, the roots were creating the wrong interest. Be careful with the amount of detail in the bark.

Build your Layout-Composition around the character and the action, try to repeat the flow of movement or counterbalance it. Remember the stage-effect.

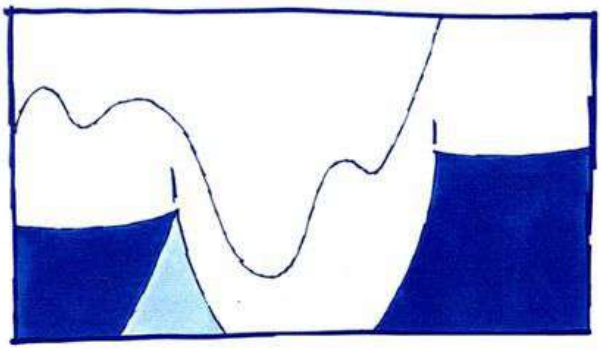
Test the best composition in small thumbnails and don't forget the **value-sketches.** Try different variations, add them to your Layout-sketch, they will be helpful for the color-key artist.

Sequ.9

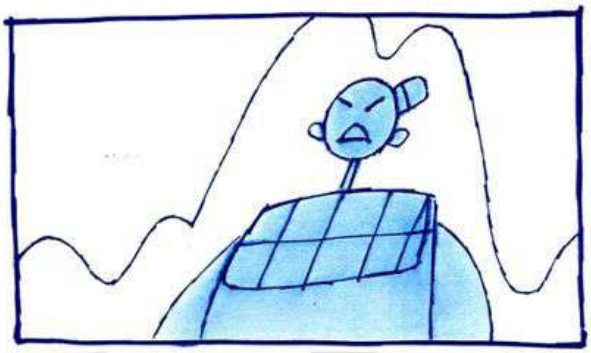
Keep the forest background simple, don't make it look like the deep Black-Forest, it should look light and fresh -

and make the characters read in front of it ...

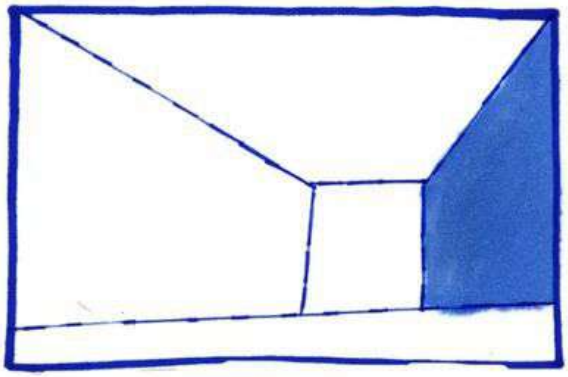
Mistakes



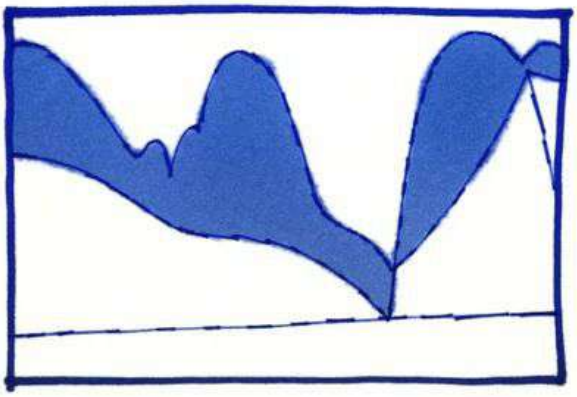
Don't repeat the shapes of Characters or Background-elements in your Composition.
Avoid to fill gaps between shapes with similar shapes.

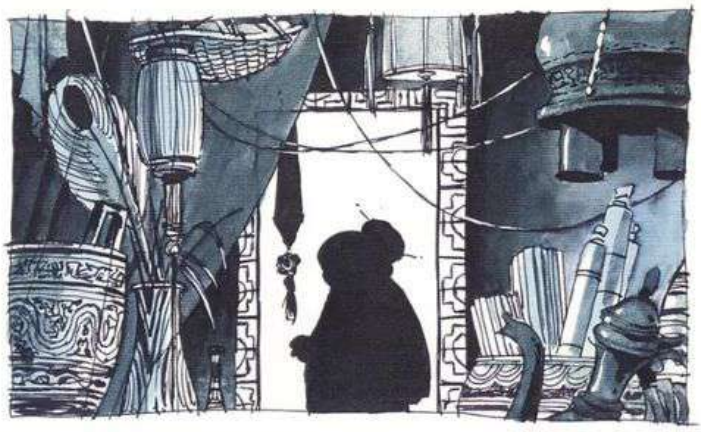


Avoid the corners of the field - lines lead the eye to nowhere.



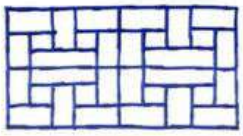
Don't create tangents and crossings - you will create interest in a non wanted area.

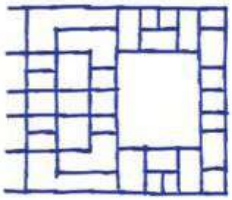


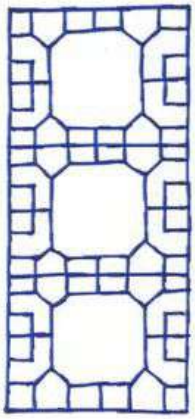


Make-up Sequ.
room dark, contrast - white face,
very moody interior with strong light and dark contrast, windows like backlit effct.

Details







COMPOSITION

Matchmaker Interior

Most of the Interior-Action is happening in close-up shots - use only some atmospheric detail in the background, don't overload it. We don't have to establish the Interior - we won't come back.
Show a wealthy environment, a bit like a boudoir - lots of curtains, vases and some other tasteless stuff.

Sequ. 1.9

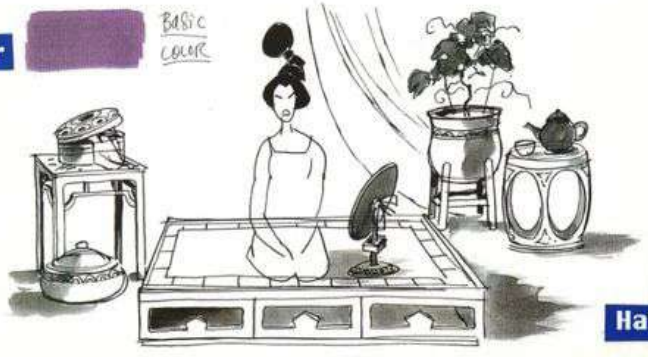
Dressmaker

basic color

Bath

basic color

basic color



Hairdresser

Interior Designs

Lake Sequence

Concentrate with detail on the foreground - see rock, lillies, lotus, grass and leaves

The Background is lit by a full moon -
keep the distant background undefined, don't even show the border of the lake -

Some ideas for the Lake-Sequence ...

Color and mood very similar to the Blue Bayou Sequence in > Make Mine Music < -

more Ultramarine than Green-Blue.

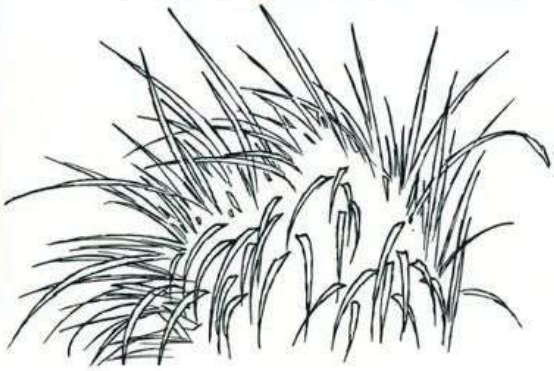
Study the landscape-Paintings of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and mix his soft painting style with the Chinese elements.

Grass

Don't use shapes in a repetitive way - even with grass you can create a dynamic composition...

Grass & Weed

Organize the Grass – divide the big confusing grassmasses into several smaller shapes. Try to make each single shape interesting in silhouette, then get the outline-look and add – if needed – some interior detail to achieve a more 3-dimensional look.



8.93

Grass

Foliage

Sequ. 7

Bamboo

Pine Trees

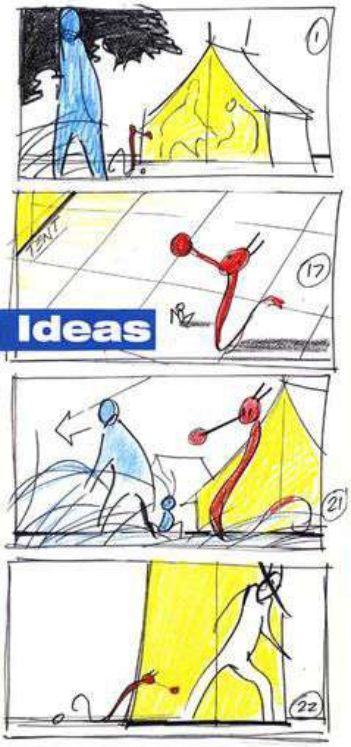
THE EASIEST WAY TOO CREATE THESE SHAPES IS — TO PAINT THEM ON A DIFFERENT SHEET WITH A THICK FELT-PEN AND THEN TRACE THESE OUTLINES INTO YOUR LAYOUT.

7.10.96 Hans

pine needles IN LAYOUT — legend of Mulan —

IN WIDER SHOTS AND IN THE DISTANCE YOU PAINT JUST THE BASIC SHAPE (HERE DARK-GREEN) — IN CLOSE-UP SHOTS ADD MORE DETAIL ON TOP IN LIGHTER COLORS, BUT — DON'T BECOME TOO REALISTIC. IT'S ENOUGH TOO MODEL SOME PINE-NEEDLE-„ISLANDS". DON'T MAKE THEM TOO SYMMETRIC !

Staging Ideas

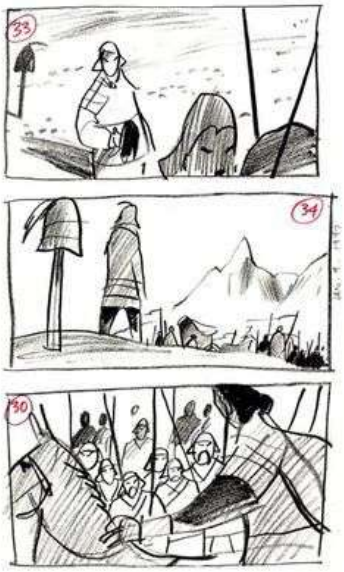


In live-action films the Cameraman together with the director decides about the placement, angle and lenses of the camera. In our medium that decision is beeing made in the workbook meetings, before the layout artist starts with the final composition.

These workbook-meetings are the most important steps in the visual design of the film. It is hard to stay awake because they are usually too long. But here the look of the final film, the staging, the edi-ting, the flow of the action will be de-signed or destroyed.

There is always room for improvement, what means - whoever has the knowledge of editing, composition and can do fast precise sketches- should prepare immediately during the discussions alternatives to be compared to the first sketches.

Staging Ideas



It is much more efficient to use sketches the directors are happy with than to describe something with words. Besides that you can right there make a choice between several alternative compositions.

That will save everybody time in the final workbook-turnover meetings, where you have to discuss more issues than just the right composition.

Staging Ideas